

Sermon – Sunday 20th October 2019 – 9.30 am

I love Friday mornings. If I don't have any other meetings, at about 11 am you will generally find me at Toddler group. It's not just the coffee that entices me – though it's always good and served with a smile. I also enjoy listening to the story and singing some songs. There is such a wonderful range of children's stories and they are often so beautifully illustrated that it's a delight to listen and watch the children's reactions.

The thing about children's stories is that, although there are those that are fantastical, allowing children to enter into another world in their imaginations, so many of them are highly relatable. There are stories of loneliness and being left out; of difference and being picked on; of characters wanting their own way and refusing to share. And in gentle yet purposeful ways the authors encourage their readers and listeners to empathise with the various characters. To recognise the importance of offering friendship to the lonely; of including those who are different; of compromising, sharing and playing together.

It sounds obvious, doesn't it, not least because we have probably heard and read these stories throughout our lives, and they contain a set of values that we consider worthwhile. But the reason these stories are told – the reason we tell them to our children – is because it isn't actually that obvious. Or perhaps more accurately, it isn't always that easy. We teach children to share because we know there is an equally strong human instinct to want to have things for ourselves. We teach children to compromise because there is a strong desire to want to have things our own way. We encourage empathy because if things are going well for us, it can be easy to ignore the suffering of others. The stories that we tell in order to instil a set of values are told because some of our human instincts could lead us to live quite differently. If that weren't the case, the story wouldn't be necessary or interesting.

And if that's true for us now, then we must surely assume that it was true of the stories that Jesus told. In this morning's gospel reading we are told, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." And Jesus probably told this story because he knew that it can be easy to forget to pray, and that sometimes we lose heart. So, if you ever fall into either of those categories, this one's for you. And my hunch is that it might be quite a few of us.

Now before we get into what the parable *does* mean, let's just dispel the odd misconception. This parable is not comparing God with the unjust judge. So this is not a story about how hard it is to get God to listen to us. Of a God who is largely deaf and require a gargantuan effort on our part to hear our pleas and petitions.

I've got a bit of homework for you this week – or you might remember without having to look back. Some weeks ago, the readings were taken from chapter 11 of Luke's gospel, and once again the theme was perseverance in prayer, a theme that Jesus returned to time and again. On that occasion, after Jesus had taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, he told the story of a friend knocking on the neighbour's door in the middle of the night for a loaf of bread because he had a visitor. And finally the neighbour responded. And in the verses thereafter, Jesus says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

The point is *not* that God is like either the unjust judge, or the neighbour who requires nagging in order to get up and provide a loaf of bread. The point is rather that if even the unjust judge will eventually give in to the woman's persistence, how much more will God – the God we know to love each and every one of us to the point of counting the hairs on our head - be there for us if we come to God in prayer?

So we've set the scene. Jesus knows God's love for us. If you look at the number of times Jesus heads off up a mountain or tries to find a quiet place for prayer, Jesus also knows the value of spending time in relationship with God. And Jesus also knows that it is going to be difficult for us to follow that same pattern. That's why he has to keep reminding us to persevere.

And that's where we might begin to think about Jesus's message for us today. What is it that gets in the way of our prayer life? It seems that the world has never been busier. Barely a moment of the day isn't filled. Have you noticed that even when we have conversations with one another, we can tend to focus on what we have been *doing*? Of course in some ways that's obvious because we need to know someone well before we can ask how they are feeling, but it's more than that. There can often be a sense that we are valued according to our activity; our productivity; our output. And prayer doesn't really fit into that model.

Perhaps there's another reason why prayer can prove so difficult. For all that Jesus assures us, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" I wonder whether that is really our experience of prayer. In a results-driven world it's fair to say that prayer can appear rather unreliable. And of course that is why it can become so easy to lose heart. Not to mention the various ways in which the world simply isn't as we might like it to be.

And that is why Jesus is so adamant that we should persevere. You see it is through prayer that we grow in relationship with God. You might not think you're very good at prayer. I'm not sure I've met anyone who thinks they are. But prayer is a relationship. It involves listening as well as talking. Hopefully it also involves some silence. And it *does* change things. Perhaps not in the ways we might have expected. Often we might not even know whether it's a real change or just one we've imagined. But transformation does happen.

So perhaps this is a week to commit ourselves once again to prayer. To find ways to spend time with God, listening. To take the time to notice signs of change. To be gentle with ourselves when we don't find it easy – Jesus knew it wouldn't be. But never ever to give up. And never to give up hope.

Amen